Science, under which the disciplines of psychology and psychiatry loosely fall, holds a privileged and powerful position in society, influencing beliefs as well as social, political, and economic values and policies. For well over half a century these disciplines have emphasized the critical role of “good mothering” in ensuring healthy infant, child, and even adult personality development. Although scientific theories, as systematic explanations for observed facts and laws that relate to a particular aspect of life (Babbie, 1992), are not born out of thin air, neither are they always grounded in objective evidence.

Developmental theories tell us that infants, children, and indeed adults develop and prosper in environments that are emotionally warm, nurturing, and stimulating and that all individuals will benefit from caregivers who are sensitive, accepting, cooperative, and always available to meet their needs. While there may be some truth in these theories, the sentiments they reflect have come to define, almost exclusively, women’s roles. These definitions also underlie our expectations of a good mother and are so much a part of our social fabric that one imagines for women generally, and mothers in particular, they have always prevailed. When it comes to the practice of mothering, theory promotes the idea that effort counts for little; instead a mother “has to be perfect, because so much is at stake—the
physical and mental health of her children, for which she is assumed to be totally responsible” (Caplan, 1989, p. 69).

This chapter looks at attachment theory, which is possibly the most influential of all theories to have articulated not only the importance of a mother’s role for ensuring healthy child development but also what it means to be a good mother. The chapter will then explore the ways in which popular culture’s focus on motherhood idealizes women’s essential nature, promoting their role as primary caregiver and nurturer. Both theory and popular culture rely on a fundamental assumption that women, but not men, possess an inborn desire, in the form of a “maternal instinct”, to nurture and care for others.

MATERNAL INSTINCT

Without going back too far into history, we find that during the latter part of the 19th century the obvious biological differences between men and women encouraged physicians to theorize that women’s reproductive organs exercised a dominating influence over their cognitive abilities and personalities. Lips (1994) quotes an anonymous physician who said that it was as if the “Almighty, in creating the female sex, had taken the uterus and built a woman around it” (Smith-Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1976, cited in Lips, p. 37).

Biological differences between men and women were often used to justify gender role differentiation and to account for differences in men’s and women’s intelligence, emotionality, motivations, and behaviours. One of the most pervasive generalizations to come out of theories popular at the turn of the 20th century was the idea of a “maternal instinct,” closely associated with childbirth and lactation and thought to influence all aspects of women’s personality (Shields, 1975; Weisstein, 1993). Simply said, these biological functions, associated only with women, led to the assumption that women were naturally more nurturing, submissive, and passive compared to men. Social Darwinism, following from evolutionary theory (e.g., Campbell, 2002) also highlighted the different, but complementary, biological functions associated with men and women that were assumed to be essential for the survival of the human race and that accounted for women’s lesser intellect and greater propensity for nurturing. Similar claims about the differences between men
and women have been made by proponents of a more recent and related school of thought—human sociobiology. Researchers like Rushton (1994), whose analysis of gender differences adheres to a sociobiological perspective, have suggested that human behaviour can best be explained by examining genes rather than looking at whole organisms within their social contexts.

Like social Darwinism and sociobiology, psychoanalytic theory has contributed to pervasive claims about “essential” gender differences. Psychoanalytic theory attempted to explain why differences existed between men and women without questioning how, when differences were evident, they might have come about. Many scholars have criticized Freud’s work over the years, while others have adapted and revised his ideas to fit within a feminist perspective (Smith & Mahfouz, 1994). Whether psychologists and other academics adhere to traditional psychoanalytic theory or not, all would likely agree that Freud’s theory has been tremendously influential in informing cultural discussions about sex and gender (Horney, 1926/1974; Storr, 1989). Clearly, theory has informed our understandings about gender similarities and differences, so much so that many believe that women, by nature, are more caring, more relational, and more communal than men. These so-called “feminine” traits are understood, by both women and men, as characteristics inherently defining women (Cole, Jayaratne, Cecchi, Feldbaum, & Petty, 2007). However, what is even more problematic is that these traits have become both descriptive and prescriptive in that “people believe not only that women are caring and nurturing but that women should be” (Cole et al., p. 212). There is evidence of this assumption not only in women’s prescribed roles as mother and homemaker but also in the employment arena, where we still see far more women than men working in the traditional caring professions and, conversely, fewer women than men employed in the more traditionally masculine areas like computing sciences, engineering, and firefighting. Chapter 3 of this text explores this topic in more detail. For now, it is sufficient to say that historically, theories purporting to explain women’s behaviour have not only placed women squarely in the domestic sphere but have largely kept them there. There are few areas where this is more obvious than in the realm of parenting.
Attachment theory, developed more than half a century ago, has played a prominent role in shaping our understanding of what it means to be a good mother and the importance of good mothering to healthy infant and child development. Founded on the early understanding of women’s essential maternal nature, the theory paid no attention to the economic, social, and cultural contexts in which women mothered, and certainly never considered fathering as a preferred or even legitimate alternative to mothering. This lack of attention to context stems in part from the theory’s historical location, where gender, sexuality, class, and race, for example, were largely absent from the construction of any psychological theory. But it was also a consequence of a fundamental belief that mothering could be framed in terms of biological drives—drives that combined infant imperatives with those of the mother and that were only present in women. The theory promoted the good mother as if it were a universal essential construct that could, and perhaps most importantly should, describe all child-bearing women.

Attachment theory arose out of a concern for children who had been displaced from their homes during the Second World War. In April 1948 the Social Commission of the United Nations resolved to study the needs of homeless children—“children who were orphaned or separated from their families for other reasons and need[ed] care in foster homes, institutions or other types of group care” (United Nations Economic and Social Council, 1948, pp. 28–29). Dr. John Bowlby took on this major task. The results of his inquiries were first published by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 1951 as a monograph entitled *Maternal Care and Mental Health*. A study designed to look at the needs of homeless children curiously resulted in a monograph entitled *Maternal Care*. Within this monograph were two main sections: the first was devoted to discussions about the “Adverse Effects of Maternal Deprivation” on child development; the second to the “Prevention of Maternal Deprivation.” Bowlby (1952a) brought with him into this important study of homeless children the concept of maternal deprivation. His focus on children deprived of mothers’ care contributed to a theory that began taking shape a decade or so before his research was commissioned by the WHO.
Bowlby was a medical doctor and qualified as a child analyst in 1937. He worked in a variety of psychiatric settings until 1945 and then spent the next 26 years of his working life in a number of influential positions, including: Child Psychiatrist Consultant, the Director of the Department for Children and Parents, and Deputy Director at the Tavistock Clinic in London. For almost the same length of time, Bowlby was also the Consultant in Mental Health for the WHO (Holmes, 1993). During the early years of his career, Bowlby published a number of articles in which he paired his ideas about juvenile delinquency and maternal deprivation (Bowlby, 1938–1950). He also worked with a research group whose focus was on children who had been placed in different therapeutic settings away from their homes and their mothers; these settings included tuberculosis sanatoriums, fever hospitals, and residential nurseries (Smith, 1995). An important member of this research team was James Robertson. Robertson was initially hired to “observe and describe the behaviour of young children during and after separation from the mother” (Robertson & Robertson, 1989, p. 12). In Bowlby’s 1944 publication, “Forty-four Juvenile Thieves,” he attributed the affectionless character of the young delinquents to maternal deprivation that followed from prolonged periods in which the children were separated from their mothers. As the researcher intimately involved with observing infants’ and young children’s responses to separation, Robertson disagreed both publicly and privately with Bowlby’s conclusions about the effects of maternal deprivation. Robertson noted that Bowlby’s analysis was “based on inferences from his therapeutic work; there were no first-hand observations on the processes of separation/deprivation” (Robertson & Robertson, p. 12). With regard to the psychological well-being of both infant and child, Robertson consistently held that the context under which separation occurred, as well as the circumstances in which the separation existed, were at least as important as the periods of separation from the mother. Nonetheless, “maternal deprivation” became the phrase of the day and set the agenda for attachment theorizing for the next six decades.

At the same time as Bowlby was promoting his ideas about the importance of maternal deprivation for understanding child pathology, there were an unprecedented number of women working outside of the home as a consequence of the Second World War; following the war it was seen as important for men’s employment opportunities as well as the stability of societies that
women should find their way back into the home and therefore out of the workforce (Gleason, 1999). A theory tied to maternal deprivation, reiterating the importance of consistent and continuous mothering to infant psychological well-being, supported the social and political mandates at that time. Gleason notes that “in order to preserve the social order, women were told by social engineers, such as psychologists, that they needed to be good wives and mothers in order to fit normally into post-war life” (p. 53). Gauvreau (2004) also states that Canadian women were “frequently criticized for neglecting their children if they assumed what were defined as masculine roles by seeking paid employment outside of the home” (p. 397). The 1950s were rife with warnings to mothers about the harmful effects of non-maternal child care on infant development (Etaugh, 1980).

As a result of his investigations into the plight of institutionalized children, Bowlby (1952a) concluded that the bond between mother and child is the most important relationship and that depriving a child of maternal care, “may have grave and far-reaching effects on his character and so on the whole of his future life” (p. 46). Bowlby warned mothers that if, during the child’s first three years, the child was not given the opportunity to form an attachment to a mother-figure, was away from their mother-figure for even brief periods of time, or was changed from one mother-figure to another, any one of these circumstances would produce “affectionless” children with “psychopathic characters.” Bowlby’s (1952a) position stressed that:

The provision of constant attention day and night, seven days a week and 365 in the year, is possible only for a woman who derives profound satisfaction from seeing her child grow from babyhood, through the many phases of childhood, to become an independent man or woman, and knows that it is her care which has made this possible. (p. 67)

What started as an academic theory soon became fodder for the popular press.

From the WHO report came a flood of reviews, popularized articles, and another book—Child Care and the Growth of Love—designed for the “ordinary reader” (Bowlby, 1996/1953, p. 7). The simplified report was originally published in 1953 and was reprinted several times over the years with only minor changes and additions, with the last edition reprinted in 1996. Bowlby had also published many brief articles in popular British magazines; articles such as “Mother is the Whole World,” emphasized an idealized role
for mother, and boldly directed mothers in ways to achieve the good mother status (Bowlby, 1952b). For example, a typical statement from Bowlby’s writings tells mothers that “the first rule in helping your toddler to grow into a happy and stable youngster able to get on well with others is to look after him yourself, ‘for better or for worse, in sickness and in health. . . ’ during his first three years” (1952b, p. 30). Similar articles such as “They Need their Mothers,” with subtitles like “At Last Science has to Admit that Mother-love is All-Important to Young People” (Bowlby, 1952c) emphasized the scientific basis underlying prescriptions for the good mother.

Even advice columnists were beginning to use Bowlby’s ideas to inform their counselling. For example, when a distraught husband whose wife had recently left admitted that he had been “tempted to steal [his son] back,” Joseph Brayshaw, the General Secretary for the British Marriage Council, advised that “Modern research, such as that conducted by Dr. John Bowlby, has shown that the parting of young children from their mothers is a frequent cause of emotional troubles when the child grows up” (1952). In response to the question “Should a woman with children take a job?” appearing in the London Chronicle, on April 23, 1952, John Bowlby (1952d) answered in the following way:

Research into the effects of daily separation is less advanced [than research into longer term separations], but it looks as though this experience often has a blunting effect on children’s development. They become apathetic and less responsive, after an early period of distress. (n.p.)

Although at the outset attachment theory received little criticism, one detractor did comment on how Bowlby’s own enthusiasm for the theory helped in its promotion, noting that “not everyone will agree that a child’s capacity for love depends so much on what happens to him in the first two years of life, but no one can fail to be impressed by Dr. Bowlby’s devotion to his theory and by the energetic way in which he expounds it” (Sarmiento, 1953, n.p.). The findings discussed in both the WHO report and the popularized Child Care were based on studies of the mental health and development of children who had been institutionalized; investigations into the early histories of adolescents and adults who had developed psychological illnesses; and follow-up studies of the mental health of children deprived of their mothers, for a variety of health-related reasons, in their early years.
Scientific language and common sense permeated Bowlby’s writings. While the idea of maternal deprivation and its relationship to the idea of a good mother, and more importantly to healthy child development, was convincing to a large proportion of the populace, there were others like Hilde Bruch (cited in Mead, 1954) who were very concerned that Bowlby’s emphasis on maternal deprivation was “a new and subtle form of antifeminism in which men—under the guise of exalting the importance of maternity—are tying women more tightly to their children than has been thought necessary since the invention of bottle feeding and baby carriages” (p. 477). In the end, the appeal of explaining psychopathology using notions of maternal deprivation had more to do with the social conditions of the time than with scientific findings.

From its inception, the notion of maternal deprivation and attachment theory played a major role in the now almost commonplace view that good mothering involves selfless, consistent, and continuous care and that adherence to these prescriptions will lead to children’s healthy personality development. One of the main criticisms is Bowlby’s overemphasis on the single factor of maternal deprivation as the primary causal agent for children’s emotional and mental disorders (Andry, 1962; Lebovici, 1962; Wootton, 1962). Mead (1954, 1962) repeatedly pointed out the ethnocentricity inherent in attachment theory. She noted, from studies of the kibbutzim system in Israel and studies with Hutterites, that “neither of these bodies of data suggests that children do not thrive and survive under conditions of group nurturing” (Mead, 1962, p. 50). The exclusivity of bond between mother and child, supported by Bowlby’s early theorizations, demanded a society in which women were expected not only to be full-time mothers but to do so in a completely selfless manner (Kaplan, 1992). And women were expected to mother as if it were the most important and satisfying job in the world. This was a view that was shared by others at the time. Notably, Winnicott’s view of the “good-enough” mother highlighted the importance of the mother-infant/child dyad and of a “primary maternal preoccupation” as a necessary state for infant health” (Appignanesi, 2007, p. 286).

ADDING “SCIENCE” TO ATTACHMENT THEORY

Beyond references to early ethiological studies and observations of special groups of children living under exceptional circumstances, Bowlby’s early
attachment theory, although popular, could be considered from a scientific perspective as fairly speculative. For its first two decades, the theory was without the support of empirical evidence. It was not until the work of Ainsworth and her colleagues that putatively scientific methods were designed to assess the relationships between those maternal characteristics outlined by attachment theory that defined the good mother and the infant attachment behaviours that were thought to result from good mothering (Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969). These early studies established three infant attachment styles, one secure and two insecure, that to date have remained effectively unchallenged. While attention was paid to scientific methods of inquiry, it is important to keep in mind that the attachment studies, like the theory they were designed to evaluate, assumed the primacy and importance of the mother-infant relationship. Researchers measured the interaction only between mothers and their infants, in an extremely artificial laboratory situation (Strange Situation: Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1974; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bell & Ainsworth, 1972).

In 1978, Rajecki, Lamb, and Obmscher published an extensive theoretical overview of the infant attachment literature. They concluded that the theory did not accord completely with documented attachment phenomena.

A heated debate followed the publication of these results. Some researchers defended both the attachment construct and the evidence generated to support it. Masters (1978), for example, stated emphatically that “differences of opinion may prevail regarding the precise nature of the concept of processes by which it operates, but the most heinous crime of all is to even consider that the concept itself is faulty, either in substance or usage”

* During the late 1960s and into the 1970s, Mary Ainsworth and her colleagues developed the Strange Situation (SS) experimental procedure (Ainsworth & Bell, 1974, 1977; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Ainsworth, Bell, & Stayton, 1971, 1974; Ainsworth & Wittig, 1969) in order to assess an infant’s reactions to separation from her or his caregiver. As of 52 weeks of age (or older) the infant, his or her mother and an observer are brought into a laboratory designed to look like a sparse living room. At various times during the 20 minute session, the mother steps out of the room leaving her infant with the observer. At other times, both the mother and the observer exit the living room leaving the infant alone. What is of primary interest in assessing infant attachments styles are the ways infants respond to their mothers during the brief reunion periods.
Those on the other side of the argument pointed to critical omissions in attachment theory that included ignoring the context in which infants form attachments (Gunnar, 1978), omitting the social and cultural factors affecting infant development and parenting practices (Cairns, 1978; Wolff, 1978), and a lack of appreciation of the cognitions that can affect human attachment (Kovach, 1978).

In spite of criticism, the proponents of attachment theory largely continued to ignore culture, class, social context, and cognitive dimensions. The studies that followed the early works of Ainsworth and her colleagues elaborated upon and added to the list of maternal qualities associated with insecure infant attachment. The fundamental question guiding research in the attachment area continued to be: What is it that mothers do, or do not do, to effect secure or insecure attachment in their infants? At the same time, the research began extending beyond short-term developmental effects towards the long-term influences on infants and children of both the good and the bad mother. More recently researchers have questioned the appropriateness of Ainsworth and her colleagues’ conceptualizations of the links between maternal sensitivity and infant security for characterizing caregiving behaviours in different socio-economic groups and cross-culturally (Posada, Carbonell, Alzate, & Plata, 2004; Posada et al., 2002; van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg, 1988). To date there has been no clear resolution of this issue: some advocates provide evidence for greater differences in infant attachment patterns within cultures than between them (e.g., Behrens, Hesse, & Main, 2007; van IJzendoorn & Kroonenberg), while others continue to challenge the theory’s cross-cultural relevance (e.g., Rothbaum, Pott, Azuma, Miyake, & Weisz, 2000). What is clear is that cultural and class differences are evident in both the processes leading to and the classification of infant attachment styles (e.g., Broussard, 1995; Leyendecker, Lamb, & Scholmerich, 1997). Mothering practices more generally have been shown to vary cross-culturally (Bornstein et al., 1998; Quinn & Mageo, 2013), and poverty has been linked to an increased risk of poor attachment outcomes (Sroufe, Egeland, Carlson, & Collins, 2005).

Notwithstanding these critiques, today we are still left with a theory promoting ideas of maternal instinct and defining what it means to be a good mother. This theory continues to inform how women think of themselves and their role as mothers and how mothering is discussed.
in both academic and popular literatures. Lest we believe that biological imperatives no longer play a role in our understanding of human behaviour today, Cole et al. (2007) investigated whether people resort to genetic explanations for perceived gender differences in nurturing more than for other perceived gendered traits. After sampling 1200 Americans, these authors found that perceived differences in nurturance were more often attributed to genetics than perceived differences in other gendered traits, including mathematical ability or violence. Although both genders did so, men were more likely than women to use genetics to explain differences in nurturing traits.

Mothering and popular culture

As one might expect from the reach and influence of some of the early theories that attributed biological imperatives to gender differences in emotions, behaviours, and cognitions, attachment theory also gained considerable cultural traction. It has played a critical role in shaping our understanding of what constitutes a “good” or conversely a “bad mother.” We are continually confronted with messages through media and popular literature that promote and encourage idealized visions of mothering. These same messages are also used to demonize mothers who transgress from the cultural prescriptions defining the good mother.

Intellectual discussions originating in academic and scientific disciplines are often co-opted and translated for women by an influential, popular media. But media does more than simply mirror reality. In many ways today’s media constructs reality (McClellan, 2007). As has always been the case, but perhaps to a greater extent today given the exponential growth of media forums and outlets, women are confronted with all kinds of advice on how to properly engage in the practice of mothering. Beginning long before the birth of a child, women are bombarded with advice from the popular media about what they must eat, drink, or smoke (or, more to the point, what not to eat, drink, or smoke) during pregnancy (Williams, 2012), as well as the best ways to manage childbirth, and child care following the birth of a child. While the advice has changed over the years, what remains remarkably constant is that it is still largely being directed at women and not men.

There are literally thousands of self-help, how-to manuals, and books advising women about what they need to do during and after pregnancy.
to ensure their own, but more importantly their infant’s, well-being. Perhaps one of the most famous authors is Dr. Benjamin Spock. By 2012, *Dr. Spock’s Baby and Child Care* was into its 9th edition and had been translated into nearly 40 languages, selling over 52 million copies since it was first published in 1946 (Spock & Needlman, 2012). One of the most popular contemporary how-to manuals—*What to Expect When You’re Expecting*—by Heidi Murkoff and Sharon Mazel (2008) is now into its 5th edition, “a perennial *New York Times* bestseller and one of *USA Today’s* most influential books” (Amazon.com review). Parenting magazines have also grown in number and popularity over the past 50 years. There is an ever-increasing focus on intensive mothering, a natural fit with attachment theory, as a way for mothers to foster children’s emotional, intellectual, and cognitive development (Quirke, 2006). While emotional work and child care management are issues that have been discussed with a similar intensity over the past 50 years, what has changed in tandem with the intensive mothering scripts is a focus on pathologizing children’s behaviour, with an escalating emphasis on psychiatric diagnoses and the need for pharmaceutical interventions to manage children’s alleged disorders (Clarke, 2010b).

**MOMS AND THE WORLD WIDE WEB**

Adding to the popular printed literature on the topic of mothering is an enormous number of websites devoted to mothering and motherhood that have proliferated over the past decade. Visitors to these sites can also find websites that provide reviews of hundreds of these single sites. Not surprisingly, the users of these sites tend overwhelmingly to be mothers and not fathers (Sarkadi & Bremberg, 2005, cited in Pedersen & Smithson, 2013). One such site is Mumsnet, which claims to be “the UK’s largest website for parents, with 4.3 million monthly unique visitors and 50 million monthly page views” (Mumsnet, 2013, n.p.). Mumsnet is up front about the fact that they are a business funded by advertising. While they do not hide their profit-making intention, they do claim to conduct business in an ethical manner, giving as an example on their website a refusal to advertise for Nestle “because of their aggressive marketing of formula in breach of international standards.” Although mothers may use sites such as Mumsnet for information and support, like other similar sites the users of Mumsnet also see it as a source of entertainment (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013).
(2013) suggests that more than four million mothers in Canada, a large proportion (86%) of the country’s “mom” Internet users, go online every day, devoting more time to using the Internet than to watching television. In terms of daily activities, the amount of time spent on the computer came behind only child care (average of almost nine hours per day) and sleeping (average of just over seven hours per day) but exceeded by at least one hour the time spent each day on housework (McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes, 2012).

Like websites devoted to mothering, mommy blogs, a recent phenomenon in the blogging world, have also flooded the Internet. These are blogs that “consist of everyday experiences written up by people—women, generally—for whom parenthood is a key identity component” (Morrison, 2010, p. 1). While large numbers of mothers are writing blogs, many are also just reading them, with figures predicted to rise to 63% of Internet users in 2014 (Dolliver, 2010). Findings from a study by McDaniel, Coyne, and Holmes (2012) showed that first-time US mothers with infants younger than 18 months old spent an average of just over three hours a day on their computers, with most of this time devoted to social networking and blogging. When asked why they blog, mothers said they wanted to document their own personal experiences of mothering, to share these experiences with others, and to stay in touch with friends and family (McDaniel, Coyne, & Holmes). Other researchers note how mothers use these sites for emotional support, parenting advice, and for protection from isolation (Pedersen & Smithson, 2013). As with the mommy website ratings, there are also a number of sites that provide directories, direct links, and rankings for hundreds of different mommy blogging sites. Each mommy blog may have a specific focus and voice, but they all have in common an interest in sharing information about motherhood. Babble (2013) selected their top 100 mom bloggers, noting the differences and similarities between them but concluding that they all “make us laugh, they make us cry, and most importantly, they make us feel like we’ve got allies in this wonderfully weird world of parenting” (p. 1).

Morrison (2010) suggests that the popularity of mommy blogs stems in part from contemporary mothers’ physical isolation from social and support networks, and she sees mothers substituting blogging as a replacement for actual face-to-face interaction. She also posits that many women, particularly those who have delayed motherhood to pursue careers, find some difficulty in aligning their new role with the realities of motherhood.
Morrison suggests, as a corollary to the difficulty of “inhabiting the identity of ‘mother’” (p. 4), that for women who experience a sense of loss of their adult self and their adult voice, blogging offers them a way to explore this tension. On blogs, not only can mothers write about their own experiences but they can also read about the experiences of others who are going through similar identity crises. Mommy blogs offer mothers the opportunity to share the real experiences of mothers, children, and families, all of which are seen to be absent in popular media representations of parenting. The act of mommy blogging can be conceptualized as real mothers “articulating private mothering publicly, rewriting the public script of motherhood in the assertion of their own writing selves, and combating the cultural ‘amnesia’ that for long tidied up the story of what it meant to mother” (Morrison, p. 7).

On the face of it, mommy blogging seems to offer an advantage to mothers that can only be realized as a consequence of Internet technology. Although these sites are frequented mainly by white, middle-class, heterosexual women, for this group of mothers online parenting communities can be empowering, providing support and advice, which in turn can lead to lower rates of depression and higher levels of self-esteem, as well as higher levels of parenting satisfaction (Madge & O’Connor, 2006). As with profitable parenting websites, some mommy bloggers have turned their spaces into lucrative businesses. One such site garners more than $40,000 a month. However, the act of mommy blogging is not without its critics or its faults, as evidenced by a number of critical pieces written in the popular media, such as the *New York Times* piece about the Motherlode blog. There have also been criticisms that these online communities reinforce stereotypes of mothering and serve to maintain unequal gender roles (Madge & O’Connor).

**Mothers in the Media**

The popular media—television, magazines, books, movies—often present a caricature of what mothers are really like, offering a template for impossibly high standards of motherhood (Bradshaw, 2013). Alternatively, the popular media can be used to stigmatize “other” mothers who do not epitomize maternal perfection. In today’s world, achieving perfect motherhood is often intertwined with an ideology of consumerism (McClellan, 2007). Dominant media images present a seamless transition of women
entering into motherhood and having it all—perfect bodies during and after pregnancy, perfect relationships, and successful careers. Trice-Black and Foster (2011) argue that “these images essentially reinforce the conception of motherhood as a test of a woman’s psychological adequacy” (p. 95). In reality, “fatigue, overwork, and lack of sexual interests are typical problems that mothers of young children bring to physicians” (Trice-Black & Foster, p. 96).

The popularization of interest in celebrity mothers and their depiction in magazines emerged in the late 1970s with the founding of *People* and *Us*, exploding in the 1990s with the publication of *InStyle* magazine (Jermyn, 2008). Some would also suggest that the (in)famous front cover photo of a very pregnant and naked Demi Moore in the 1991 issue of *Vanity Fair* was a key moment in the history of pairing celebrity with motherhood (Buttenwieser, 2007). Since then, the fascination with celebrity moms has continued with a vengeance. One has only to glance at magazine covers while waiting in grocery checkout lines or flip through recent issues of *People* magazine to be reminded of the volume of information—adorable, sexy pictures and adoring text devoted to celebrity moms and their progeny—of the perfection standards set by today’s celebrity mothers.

However, there are also those celebrity moms who deviate from these impossible standards and who are then severely criticized in those same magazines. Britney Spears provides an example of such a deviation. On the side of perfection, Sara Jessica Parker (SJP), of *Sex in the City* fame, has been featured extensively in the popular press as a mother whose sense of style, for herself and her children, is held up as an ideal for all mothers. Jermyn describes how *Elle* magazine, in an interview with SJP featuring a montage of pictures of her in various fashionable outfits, referred to her “baby bump” as her “latest accessory” (p. 166). Jermyn goes on to describe an article in the *New York Times*, shortly after SJP had delivered her son, which cited her as a woman “heading the list” of glamour moms after she appeared on the covers of two New York tabloids and *People* magazine. The concern is not so much about how SJP or other celebrities might look during pregnancy or how they might choose to dress their children, or even how the press chooses to represent these mothers to the public. Proclamations such as that issued by Angelina Jolie that “satisfaction comes not from her work but from her kids” (Cohen, 2010, cited in Trice-Black & Foster, p. 97),
together with her description by the press as “completely absorbed in the role of the matriarch, architect of a perfect family. For this role, she will cast aside all others,” (Cohen, 2010, cited in Trice-Black & Foster, p. 97) present a misleading picture of motherhood for most ordinary women. Although, clearly, the realities of celebrity mothers are not mirrored in the day-to-day lives of most women, the Yummy Mummy movement appears to aspire to replicate the glamorous persona of celebrity mothers for all mothers.

Liz Fraser (2009), in her book *The Yummy Mummy’s Survival Guide*, described yummy mummy as a mother of any age who does not identify with the traditional, dowdy image of motherhood; who is fashion conscious to an extreme; and who is an expert caregiver, homemaker, and working woman. In other words, the yummy mummy exudes perfection on all fronts. Sociologist Gillian Anderson noted in an interview that the mothers she has talked with in her research on yummy mummies do not see this image as “a representation of mothering or motherhood that was thought to be empowering to them as women or mothers in general” (Stein–Wotten, 2013, n.p.). Anderson further noted that the mothers she interviewed voiced the opinion that “the yummy mummy is largely an ideal type, one that is unrealistic and unattainable for most mothers” and that women considered the term “derogatory, sexist, egocentric as well as inherently culturally and class biased” (Stein–Wotten, n.p.). And although on the Yummy Mummy Club (YMC, 2013) website the definition has been toned down for its 20,000 viewers to suggest “a state of mind. A woman trying to find the near impossible balance of raising kids while still finding time for herself” (n.p.), the definition nonetheless, like media portrayals of celebrity mothers, promotes women’s complete absorption in motherhood. As such, these sorts of images and ideals continue to be damaging reflections of how motherhood should be enacted.

While the yummy mummy and the many other contemporary descriptions of a “new” motherhood propagated by the media appear to offer new insights into mothering, in reality they are suspiciously reflective of motherhood prescriptions from the past. Couture (1947), for example, in his opening chapter to *The Canadian Mother and Child*, an information manual for prospective Canadian mothers, wrote, “The birth of a baby is the most glorious achievement in the life of a woman, for, in becoming a mother, she completely fulfils the special purpose of her existence as a
woman” (p. 1). The difference today is that not only are women asked to perform mothering with the same total absorption but they must now do it in style and in concert with work outside of the home. Perhaps most importantly, “while women dwell over whether or not they are more of a ‘yummy mummy’ or an ‘earth mom,’ they have less time to consider the deeper questions of loss of self and sacrifice that come with motherhood” (Tropp, 2013, p. 143). Such discourses not only reaffirm women’s role as the primary caregiver, they further intertwine maternal perfection with consumerism and within a neoliberal discourse.

In contrast to the portrayal of celebrity mothers, the portrayal of “real” mothers shows a different side of the media’s focus on motherhood. Robson (2005) discusses the media coverage of the inquest into the death of an infant living with his mother in a women’s shelter in Toronto in 1997. The mother was a 19-year-old woman who had been homeless for the four years prior to her son Jordan’s birth. Jordan died from starvation when he was 37 days old. The young mother had been breastfeeding and when her milk dried up she resorted to using over-diluted formula. The media, rather than highlighting the appalling conditions the mother was forced to live in while she tried to care for her infant, deflected all responsibility from the state and social services system, labelled Renee Heikamp as “a ‘bad mother,’ and held her up as an object of contempt” (Robson, p. 218).

Another example of all mothers not being treated equally by the media comes through a comparison of women facing multiple births with those who are illegal drug users (Charles & Shivas, 2002). At first blush, this might seem an odd comparison, but it makes the point that only some women are deemed worthy of community support. In their study, Charles and Shivas focused on the McCaughey sextuplets and found a total of 210 newspaper articles devoted to discussions of the multiple births; during the same period, 90 newspaper articles looked at pregnancy and mothers’ illegal drug use. Their findings showed that 73% of the illegal drug use articles discussed punishment for mothers who took drugs during pregnancy and included derogatory remarks about the mothers; 40% talked about drug use during pregnancy as a form of child abuse; 22% discussed the children’s welfare post-birth; and 7% focused on finding ways that would stop these mothers from having more children. By comparison, the media coverage for the mother and her septuplets was focused on
discussions of gifts (42%); and while 35% mentioned potential and actual birth defects, none discussed the possibility of criminal charges; and only 10% discussed concern for the welfare of the septuplets. While 8% of the newspaper articles issued some criticism of the parents for their decision to use fertility drugs or to continue with such a high-risk pregnancy, 19% of the articles were critical of the “fertility industry.” Charles and Shivas further note that in those articles that looked at mothers and their illegal drug use, no criticisms were levelled at either the drug dealers or the illegal drug industry.

CONCLUSION

The early adoption of the ideas surrounding attachment theory made some sense, given the historical period in which the theory was developed. Attachment theory was born at a time when many orphaned children were in group homes and the health care system required that children spend long stays in the hospital, separated from familiar people and surroundings and where visits from family were discouraged. Also the theory came to fruition in the early postwar years, when historical numbers of women were in the workforce and needed some encouragement to get back into the home. From a practical perspective, it did offer compelling reasons—not so much evidence—for women to be devoted to their infants and small children.

However, today we have the tools to understand mothering and motherhood in a different light. We can now be more skeptical of science and its empirical methods as the route to absolute truth and, in doing so, question the assumptions, origins, and consequences of theory. Attachment theory makes far less sense as a way to explain the relationships between mothering and infant and child outcomes today than it did at the time of its inception, and yet the ideas continue to be promoted in both the academic and popular literatures, as evidenced by the thousands of articles that have been published in the past six decades (Ross, 2006).

Kuhn (1970) emphasized how a paradigm, shared by members of a specialized community, can be described in terms of theories, models, tacit knowledge, beliefs, and values. Dominant paradigms are influenced by the cultural backgrounds of those generating the knowledge as well as by the contexts in which the knowledge develops. A number of conditions can
facilitate a system of thought becoming an accepted dominant paradigm. These include professional, government, and media organizations giving legitimacy to the paradigm; leading scholars supporting it; journals, editors, and educators disseminating the paradigm; lay groups embracing beliefs that are central to the paradigm; and finally, access to funding made available to conduct further research by members of a professional group who are recognized for their knowledge, competence, and authority within a specific domain (Haas, 1992). All of these factors have supported the spread and popularity of attachment theory and its subsequent impact on the lives of mothers.

The media too plays a role in supporting dominant paradigms through its promotion and circulation of ideas to the public. Over the past 60 years, popular television programs depicting variations of women’s maternal roles have changed to suit dominant discourses about motherhood. Early portrayals of women in the pre-feminist era were seen in television shows such as *I Love Lucy* (1951–1957), *Leave it to Beaver* (1957–1963) and *Father Knows Best* (1954–1960), which largely presented women as happy housewives. These portrayals were supplanted by programs like *Roseanne* (1988–1997), which showed a maternal character “who pushed the intersections between class and the role of the mother in a working class family” (Bradshaw, 2013, p. 166). By 2007, depictions of contemporary mothering in reality television programming (e.g., *16 and Pregnant*, *Jon & Kate Plus 8*, *Pretty Wicked Moms*) distorted and misrepresented the good, the bad, and the ugly of motherhood.

The media also uses its power of persuasion to support dominant social and political neoliberal ideologies. A case in point was the media frenzy over the Mommy Wars, which pitted stay-at-home mothers against working mothers, promoting idealized notions of motherhood (Akass, 2012, 2013). Not only was the war largely fabricated by the media, it instilled anxiety and distracted women from pressing social and political issues surrounding mothering in contemporary Western societies (Akass, 2012, 2013). While the so called Mommy Wars may have helped to sell newspapers, issues that run afoul of neoliberal sentiments, such as lack of maternity benefits for mothers, child care, and equal pay do not. In short, neither academic theory nor the popular media is immune to political, social, and cultural pressures to promote idealized roles of motherhood for women.